EXPLORING THE IMPACT OF FLEXIBILITY ON QUALITY BENCHMARKS IN DISTANCE EDUCATION

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ABSTRACT: Internet Based learning is an emerging concept in distanced education now-a-days. Quality Benchmarks were also equally important to consider. The study was aimed to investigate the impact of flexibility in internet based distance education on quality benchmarks. A self-administered 7 point likert scale questionnaire was adopted for primary data collection. Virtual University of Pakistan has been chosen as target organization under judgmental sampling technique. 205 faculty members of Virtual University of Pakistan recorded their responses. Correlation and regression analysis was run in Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) 19.0 for data analysis. Findings proved that flexibility has positive impact on quality benchmarks. Data shows that flexibility explains 18.9% variation in quality benchmarks.

Key words: Flexibility, Distance Learning Education System, Quality Benchmarks, Faculty Support, Course Development, Course Structure.

INTRODUCTION

Distance education is a system where the learner interacts with the instructor through a system in which modern technologies are used. Like internet etc. (Simonson et al., 2000). In this system the students do not have any direct contact with their instructors. A wide range of media and internet is used to offer degree programs to the students (Sultana and Kamal, 2002). Flexible learning facilitates students to provide teaching throughout the year. Learning may start at multiple times and finish at multiple dates. It provides extension dates for assignments submission also. Flexibility of online learning affects the pace and momentum of campus life. It totally changes the administrative and academic management as well as contracts of staff members as well. Flexibility is the main and key element of online learning. This characteristic of learning cannot be left alone to develop for further growth. If the same situation happens, it will be impossible to manage and at last it will collapse. The quality of online distance education demands to be correct and must be the part of the system (Lentell, 2012).

It is important to know that why online distance education attracts many learners? It is because, it provides very attractive benefits to the students. Major benefit is convenience of time. Students can study in flexible timings shifts. Conveniences are to get help from outside the class hours, finalize the assignments and search for an appropriate guidelines and getting lectures outside the class as well. It totally saves the students' time. Students can get help from instructors at anytime and anywhere. Video lectures are easily accessible.

Online learning helps the students to actively and freely learn, with their own speed and review the lectures many times (Leh and Jobin, 2003).

It is reality that many of the online students have only interest in obtaining degree rather than acquiring traditional education. Students are more interested to raise their knowledge which enhances their professional capabilities. So students want not only to learn with academic point of view, rather want practical knowledge as well. Students have many responsibilities at a time like family, job, careers and studies, so their performance may suffer from traditional studies. The instructor needs to play a role here in order to flourish the students' capabilities and maintain high standards (Leh and Jobin, 2003).

It is pointed out there must be a common agreement on standards, benchmarks and performance measurements for the internal and external assessments of procedures and its results must be valid and consistent. In absence of above, it is really unachievable (Robinson, 20004). Some other education experts are of the view that quality of education in distance learning education system can be evaluated on the same criteria and benchmarks which are set for conventional education and institutes. Others are of the opinion that standards, and benchmarks applied in conventional education cannot be valid on online and distance education because it's different in nature (Stella and Gnanam, 2004).

According to the observation of (Koul, 2009) conventional institutions are very selective and they only give admission to those students who have high grades whereas distance education has the policy to be open for every one and there are different types of interaction among student and teachers.

Common persons, who are mostly not familiar with distance learning education system and its characteristics, are not satisfied with its quality. They have a view point that only interaction and full day time spent at the campus with the teachers, is the only way to make education standards effective, otherwise it is not quality education. So the research is vital to measure the impact of flexibility on quality benchmarks. The current study is conducted in order to get the answer of the question that "Does the flexibility has impact on quality benchmarks in distance education?"

This study has following research objectives;

- To investigate the relationship between flexibility and quality Benchmarks
- To investigate the impact of flexibility on quality Benchmarks

Significance of the study is vital. It will help the educationists and governing bodies in policy making. It will help students to make their decision of acquiring education internet based distance education. It will help researchers for internet based distance education in future.

The study has been focused on four important quality benchmarks which are Faculty Support, Teaching/learning Process, Course Development and Course Structure. One is Course Development which includes the standards related to course design and delivery. Other is Teaching/Learning Process which explores the pedagogy of teaching. Another is Course Structure which involves all the written policies regarding teaching process and last is faculty support which relates to assistance provided to faculty during online teaching (Phipps and Merisotis, 2000).

Based on above literature review, Figure-1 shows the conceptual framework. The independent variable is the Flexibility whereas Faculty support, Teaching/Learning Process, Course Development and Course Structure are considered to be one construct of Quality Benchmarks and deals as a dependent variable. Hypothesis of study includes: H1: Flexibility in distance education system has significant impact on Quality Benchmarks.

Figure-1 Showing Conceptual Framework

MATERIALS AND METHODS

205 faculty member of Virtual university of Pakistan were chosen as respondents under judgmental sampling. This sampling technique was applied when only a category of people had information. This methodology was reported by (Tashakkori and Teddlie, 2003). Purposive sampling was used because it was very useful where target segment had special knowledge about the research issue (Jupp, 2006). The present study was carried out on internet based distance education having used IT Support so judgmental Sampling was made. It was also called as purposive sampling. This technique demanded well informed respondents. The reason was

that it was a leading and pioneer university providing this technology. It has 6 independent channels. The data was collected from all the 215 faculty members including Assistant Professors, Lecturers, and Instructors. Total responses received were 205. Faculty members were selected from all the branches of Virtual University of Pakistan as Lahore, Karachi and Islamabad.

Research was conducted with faculty perspective so Faculty members were taken as unit of analysis. An already developed questionnaire on 7 point liket scale was adopted for the study. The questionnaire was derived from (Phipps and Merisotis, 2000). "Quality on the line: Benchmarks for success in internet based distance education', (Malley and McCraw, 1999) Students perception of distance learning, online learning

and the traditional classroom (Selim, 2007) Critical Success factors for e-learning acceptance and Confirmatory factor models. Reliability was checked through Cronbach's Alpha. The standardized Cronbach's Alpha value was 0.927 which was acceptable. Correlation and Regression Analysis was used to analyze the data. Data was analyzed with respect to demographics initially. The output of data showed that 56.6% males and 43.4% females participated in the study. 50.2% of the

respondents fell in 26-30 years age slab. 54.6% of respondents were married while 45.4% of the respondents were single. 53.7% of the respondents were MS/M.Phill.

RESULTS

The data collected was initially analyzed to test relationship between two variables.

Table-01. Showing Pearson Correlations Analysis

Sr. #		Mean	Standards Deviation	1	2	3	4	5
1	Flexibility	5.21	0.862	1				
2	Faculty Support	4.31	0.975	.310**	1			
3	Teaching/Learning Process	4.73	0.873	.388**	.570**	1		
4	Course Development	4.88	0.777	..356**	.682**	.752**	1	
5	Course Structure	4.97	0.795	.441**	.447**	.734**	.623**	1

**. Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

Table-1 showed that flexibility (Independent variable) had mean value of 5.21. Faculty support, Teaching/Learning Process, Course Development and Course structure (Components of Dependent Variable) had mean values of 4.31, 4.73, 4.88 and 4.97 respectively. Mean values showed that faculty members were mostly satisfied with flexibility and with three other quality benchmarks i.e. Teaching/Learning Process, Course Development and Course structure. Faulty members had neutral opinion regarding faculty support only.

Pearson correlation between flexibility and Teaching/Learning process was 0.734 which showed high and positive relationship between the two variables. It showed that if flexibility was put in the system, teaching

and learning process would be improved as well. Pearson correlation showed that 2nd most important factor was Course development which had 0.623 correlation value. It showed a moderate and positive relationship between the two variables. If flexibility was adopted then course development would increase. The relationship between Flexibility and Faculty Support had correlation value of 0.447 which showed moderate and positive correlation between the two variables. It proved that if flexibility was a part of the distance education system, the faculty support would be increased. The relationship between Flexibility and Course structure had a low value of 0.441 which showed moderate and positive relationship again. It revealed that course structure can be improved by offering flexibility in system.

Table-02. Showing Regression Analysis

	Coefficients[a]					
Model		Unstandardized Coefficients		t	Sig.	Decision
		B	Std. Error			
1	(Constant)	2.812	.281	9.997	.000	Supported
	Flexibility	.367	.053	6.884	.000	0.000 < 0.05

$r = .435$, $R^2 = .0.189$
Dependent Variable: *Quality Benchmarks*

Linear Regression Analysis was used to further test impact of flexibility on all four components of quality benchmarks. Regression analysis results indicated that the predictor explained 18.9% of the variance ($R2 = .0.189$, $p < .01$) as shown in Table-02, therefore model was valid and the overall regression was statistically significant. The regression coefficient B represented that the amount the dependent variable will change if independent variable was changed by one unit. Table-2

indicated the significant impact of flexibility on Quality benchmarks. The data revealed that 18.9% variance was observed by dependent variable which was quality benchmarks. Distance Learning Education System had significant impact on quality benchmarks.

The simple regression model showed that flexibility of 18.9% variation was found in quality benchmarks. Flexibility was statistically highly significant at less than one percent and positively related

with quality benchmarks. Lower level of standard errors showed better estimation of the model.

Table-03 showed the output of Breusch-Godfrey test of auto correlation and probability value of Chi2 favors acceptance of null hypothesis. It means the residuals were not serially correlated at 2nd lag.

Table-03. Showing Breusch-Godfrey Serial Correlation LM Test

F-statistic	0.974171	Prob. F(2,201)	0.3793
R-square	1.968037	Prob. Chi-Square(2)	0.3738

Table-04. Showing Heteroskedasticity Test: Glejser

F-statistic	5.421805	Prob. F(1,203)	0.0209
R-square	5.332791	Prob. Chi-Square(1)	0.0209
Scaled explained SS	5.350639	Prob. Chi-Square(1)	0.0207

Table-04 showed that the Glejser test of cross sectional data has also been applied. Rejection of null hypothesis sheds light that residual were not having constant variance or Homoskedastic.
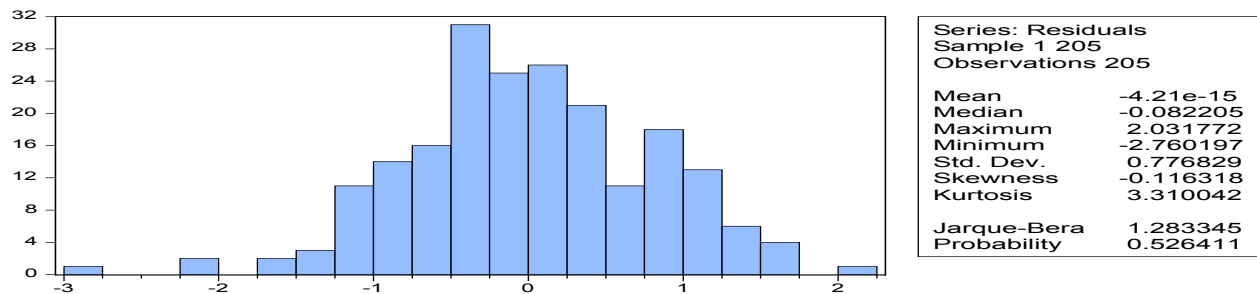

Figure-2 Showing Jarque Bera Test

Figure-02 showed that Jarque Bera (JB) test was applied on residuals of the equation or model under study. Acceptance of null hypothesis of the test indicated sound justification to claim that residual of the model was normally distributed which validate t-tests.

This model need not to conduct test of Multicollinearity owing to simple model because it had only one independent variable in equation.

DISCUSSION

The outcome of analysis proved that Teaching/Learning Process has strongest relationship with flexibility. Data revealed that course structure had lowest relationship with flexibility. If the distance learning education system was flexible it could enhance the education quality. The data revealed that Flexibility was an essential factor of distance learning education system which had strong relationship with quality of education. The system did not require significant changes. The system worked well with students' schedule with other activities. The students who studied in online education were usually the job- holders. They had dual responsibilities other than education so they acquired studies only on part time basis. On the contrary the young students were more suitable in full time study program as they had no extra responsibility at home, had accommodation at campus and were interested in part time jobs and extra-curricular activities. These characteristics of students moved along while comparing graduate and non- graduate students (Carrillo and Renold, 2000). The concept of flexibility was not emerging concept in educational programs (Moore and Kearsley, 2011). Distance education had been practicing since many years ago and a lot of research and development had already been conducted in discovering the associated practices and procedures in distance learning which must be effective. This flexibility and technology had provided just-in-time learning to many students who were facing many obstacles previously (Oliver, 2002).

The prime objective of the study was to study the impact of flexibility on Quality Benchmarks. The current study proved that flexibility has significant impact on quality benchmarks. Open and distance

learning provided many benefits to students. One of the main benefits was convenience which included both flexibility and time saving (Leh and Jobin, 2003, Poon et al. 2004, Folorunso et al. 2006, Selim (2007) and Volery and Lord (2000) argued that online and distance learning education system was greatly affected by students' level of satisfaction. Its standards mainly depend upon students' satisfaction with flexibility and time saving characteristics, students' interaction through IT support system, students' level of self-confidence. It also depended upon students' anxiety level and students' initiative and motivation level (Yiong et al., 2008). It was generally perceived that flexibility played a main role in online learning acceptance but must be accompanied with students' initiative to learn and students' level of confidence in participating in online learning courses effectively (Yiong et al., 2008). Online learners were usually older and had professional background. They were more mature than younger students (Leh and Jobin, 2003). Therefore it was proved that flexibility had positive impact on Quality Benchmarks.

The data revealed that flexibility had significant impact on quality benchmarks. Distance learning education system offered many advantages to the students. It saved their times. Most of the students who were job holders were enrolled in online courses. It worked well with their activities. Most of the online students were mature and married so they had to look after their families as well. So time saving was the major advantage of distance learning education system which attracted the students. On the other hand, Quality benchmarks were also of vital importance. Data proved that flexibility had significant relationship with quality benchmarks. If this advantage was the part of distance learning education system it not only offered the quality education, rather it helped the educationist to improve the quality benchmarks.

This system had no age limit for admission so students of old ages could also take benefit from this system. The system did not require significant changes by the students in their schedules so it served best. Teachers had a lot of time to reply the queries of students. Teachers consulted books and notes and replied the students effectively. Faculty could deal a lot of courses at a time. Faculty members could teach many courses in one year and enhanced their skills and knowledge as well.

The role of faculty in Distance Learning Education System was different from conventional teaching so highly qualified professionals should be hired. The qualification of faculty members should be consistent with quality standards and online courses learning outcomes. The institute should clearly identify the selection criteria of faculty members, their periodic performance the reviewed, and their promotion criteria must also be considered. Pedagogy of internet learning should be the part of training and development in DLE system. The institute should design a student support services model which reflects the flexibility for students. It should be open enough to reply and deal with all the queries and needs of students. The Service should consist of financial aid and counseling to students as well which is mostly missing in DLE system. The student support services should address the diversity of students as well.

This study was conducted in a quantitative mode. But in future this study could be conducted in a qualitative approach in order to get the response of open ended questions also. In the present study only the faculty members were selected as respondents. However, for future study the students and administrtial staff can also be added in the study. This study contained had limited sample size. While for future research, the sample size could be increased.

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